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ABSTRACT

Disagreement exists about the role and function of middle schools. Demand for improved student achievement, greater accountability, improved test scores, and greater responsiveness to parents characterize tensions. This paper reports on the efforts of one community to examine its middle-school program and reposition it to become more effective at serving its students. The study looked at five schools in one district located in the suburbs of a major midwestern metropolitan area. All schools offer a similar academic program. It used a modified case-study approach that recognizes the uniqueness of each school setting. Tensions identified in the reform process included real involvement for all concerned versus superficial involvement, levels of trust, narrow interests versus broad reform, and focusing on student interests versus employee interests. The paper describes how a program-review committee was formed and conducted itself, including the selection process, use of an external facilitator, use of data to identify essential issues, and programmatic responses. The result was the creation of an ongoing, healthy conversation about the middle-level program, built on a foundation of trust, commitment to collaborative work, and a focus on strengthening the program for students. (Contains 31 references.) (RT)

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Democracy at Work: The Struggle to Renorm One Middle Level Program

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Disagreement about the role and function of middle level schools continues unabated. Proponents of a strong academic program and advocates of a developmental approach debate the values on which middle level programs are based. Like two competing weather systems, one warm and one cold, the positions often result in contentious and stormy discourse (Beane, 1999; Williamson & Johnston, 1999).

While the debate continues nationally, individual schools are faced with resolving these tensions in a local context (Johnston & Williamson, 1998; Williamson & Johnston, 2000). Demand for improved student achievement, greater accountability, improved test scores, and greater responsiveness to parents characterize the tensions.

In response many schools launch collaborative efforts with parents and faculty to identify local needs and to strengthen their middle school programs. These initiatives are often designed to build confidence and support for the school.

This paper reports on the struggle in one community over its middle school program. It describes the strains which emerged as parents, teachers and administrators gathered data about program satisfaction, designed a process to refine that program, and established a mechanism for regular and systematic program improvement.

Successful strategies involved complex approaches to resolving differences among group members. They were designed to address the underlying issues creating the tensions and to result in durable solutions. The depth of the concerns and the strongly held beliefs which engendered the beliefs often led to frustration and the lack of quick solutions. While the approaches described took longer to craft, required a greater level of commitment form all parties, and necessitated creative and flexible responses, they resulted in stronger and more viable relationships which contributed to the success of the committee's work.

Middle Level Reform

Efforts to reform middle level schools (e.g., junior high, middle school) began in the late 1960s. At the heart of the debate is the function and purpose of the middle level school (Beane, 1999; Williamson & Johnston, 1999).

Despite its prevalence, middle level schools provoke passionate feelings--both positive and negative. For some, middle schools set the standard for educational reform--responding to student needs and focused on strengthening curricular and instructional practice. Others believe middle level schools represent what's wrong with American education--over emphasis on social and emotional issues and a lowering of academic standards (Beane, 1999).

Many schools initiated reforms based on recommendations by national organizations (Carnegie Council, 1989; National Middle School Association, 1995; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1985). Despite the growing adoption of the recommendations (Jackson & Davis, 2000; McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 1996; Valentine, Clark, Irvin, Keefe, & Melton, 1993;), and the evidence that the suggestions positively impact students (Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand, & Flowers, 1997; Lee & Smith, 1993), parents and others continue to raise concerns about middle level schools (Beane, 1999; DeYoung, Howley & Theobald, 1995; Johnston & Williamson, 1998; Saks, 1999).

Cuban (1992) described the community relations need this way.

> As long as schools have all the trademarks of what the public expects in a school, they are 'real schools.' If the public loses confidence in the district's capacity to produce real schools displaying familiar features, rules and classifications, political support and funding shrink swiftly (p. 248).

This presents a significant challenge for proponents of the middle level school. After thirty years there is no agreement about the impact of the middle level movement. Schools have established teams, altered schedules, adjusted grouping practices and modified curriculum. Still, questions remain about the middle school model and its effect on student learning.

What Were the Issues with Middle Level Schools?

Despite more than thirty years of implementation, concerns remain about the middle level school. An earlier study identified a set of issues that reflect concern about the organization and structure of the middle level school as well as curricular and instructional practice (Johnston & Williamson, 1998). Middle level schools were often positioned to conform to some vague philosophy about middle schools, a philosophy often misunderstood or misinterpreted by constituent groups (Williamson & Johnston, 2000).

Seven areas characterized the concern. They included:

Anonymity - The larger size of the middle level school accounted for a pervasive sense of anonymity prevalent in parent encounters with schools. Parents often felt no one knew their child well, that their children were in danger of "falling through the cracks," and that given the workload of teachers there was little likelihood that the school could pay much attention to their child.

Curriculum - Curriculum appeared as a maze of unconnected activities to many parents. They were often bewildered by efforts at "interdisciplinary units" and failed to see their relevance to academic achievement.

Rigor and Challenge - Based on their interactions with school personnel and with the instructional program, parents articulated serious concern about what they perceive as a "lack of rigor" in the middle grades program. Parents also questioned the idiosyncratic nature of student performance standards--standards that often varied from teacher to teacher, team to team.

Safety, Sociability and Civility - While most parents believed their children were safe at school, they expressed concerns about some aspects of student behavior. They frequently stated that students were permitted to be too "unruly" and that adults neither modeled nor monitored appropriate standards for behavior.

Responsiveness - Many parents thought the school was not responsive to their requests and inquiries. Responsiveness did not mean getting their way but

rather meant adopting a proactive stance to help their children without waiting for the parent to demand assistance.

Instruction - Parents believed that their children received "high quality instruction" but they were concerned that it was often "dull and boring." Parents complained that instruction too frequently consisted of teacher centered activity such as lecture and student seat work.

Parent and Public Relations - A common concern for parents was the lack of strategies for dealing with routine problems. They often reported an absence of clarity about whom to call, or how to get information. Parents received mixed messages from school personnel, often from elementary and high school teachers who had little information about the program but whose criticisms greatly influenced parent perception of the middle level school.

This Study

In response to the debate about the purpose and function of the middle level school many school districts launched a review of their program. Such reviews were almost always driven by local issues such as changes in school governance, increases or decreases in population, altered financial means, or state mandates (Clark & Clark, 1994; Williamson & Johnston, 1991).

This paper reports on the efforts of one community to examine its middle level program and reposition it to become more effective at serving the students in its schools. It's initiative, like most others, was driven by local concern about the quality of the program. Recent changes in school governance and increased demands for high levels of student achievement provoked the initial discussions about program review.

The Community Context

This school district, located in the suburbs of a major midwestern metropolitan area, has five middle level schools. The schools vary in size and demographics but offer a similar academic program.

The district is home to several major research and technology firms and has grown dramatically in recent years, resulting in changing student and community demographics. Most students come from upper middle class families and overall achievement is solid. Recently, the district was recognized as one of finest in the world based on the TIMMS assessment (Martin, et al., 2001; Mullis, et al., 2001).

The district has a legacy of high performance and high expectations for students, staff, and the district. It is recognized as a leader in many curricular areas and prides itself on its commitment to excellence, to continually refining and strengthening its program.

As a result of this commitment to continuous improvement the district launched a review of its middle level program in the fall of 1999. The goal was to systematically analyze the middle grades program and make recommendations for ways to strengthen and enhance it, to align more appropriately with current and anticipated student needs, and to address programmatic inequities.

Methodology and Data Analysis

This investigation utilized a modified case study approach (Stake, 1995). It examined in some depth the issues and concerns as well as the approaches to resolving those concerns in one school district.

The data for this investigation were gathered from participants in the review process, in the natural setting of their work. What Lincoln and Guba (1985) call naturalistic inquiry, others call a phenomenological approach. Borg, Gall, and Gall (1993) elaborated on the value of such an approach. It allows the researcher to "develop an understanding of individuals and events in their natural state, taking into account the relevant context" (p. 194). Such an approach recognizes the uniqueness of each setting and is particularly relevant when the researcher wants to examine and understand a program or event from "the perspective of the participants" (p. 194).

The researcher served as facilitator for the review committee's work. As such, the researcher had first-hand knowledge of the issues and the debate.

While helpful to have such ready access to the subjects, such access may lead to subjective bias. To minimize subjectivity the perspectives that emerged from this work were shared with committee members and district staff. Such "member checking" is a useful way to assure validity for qualitative research (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). If the researcher's reconstructions are recognizable to the subjects as accurate representations of their realities it lends credibility to the conclusions.

Data were collected in a number of ways. First, the researcher maintained detailed field notes, including a reflective journal, throughout the study. These notes helped to reconstruct the discussion and debate that emerged during the review committee's work. Second, review committee members were e-mailed regularly to elicit their ideas and response to the committee's work. Their responses became part of the field notes. Third, the committee maintained detailed records of its work (e.g., agendas, minutes, planning documents). In each case those records were constructed by a member of the committee, not the researcher. Each document was reviewed and accepted as accurate by the committee as a whole.

An ongoing data analysis process was utilized for this study (Eisner, 1991; Yin 1994). Information was arranged in files for each meeting and each topic (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Sources of information were charted and coded (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Charles' (1995) four steps were utilized to identify topics, cluster topics into categories, form categories into patterns, and develop conclusions based on the patterns.

Data were analyzed to identified patterns of responses and revealed major themes. Documents and records were reviewed, using key word and trend analyses. The themes were confirmed and the field notes provided explicit details and examples to illustrate each of the themes and responses.

Renorming Middle Level Education

Early efforts to reform middle level education were characterized by adoption of a set of program characteristics, often those espoused by national advocacy groups (Williamson & Johnston, 1999). These initiatives reflected efforts by middle level educators to examine their practice so that it more closely aligned with the needs of students.

Too often such efforts were driven by changes in student population and too often were adopted without broad participation by teachers, parents and other community members. This lack of involvement frequently led to misunderstanding and mistrust of the motives behind the program changes (Clark & Clark, 1994; Beane, 1999).

Mounting evidence demonstrates that many of the recommendations for reformed middle level schools contribute to improved achievement and a more positive school environment (Felner, et al., 1997; Lee & Smith, 1993; Russell, 1997). Nevertheless, concerns continue to emerge from individual schools and local school districts about their appropriateness and effect.

As these concerns emerge school leaders face demands to engage school constituents in processes to review and examine their middle level programs. Experience demonstrated that the most effective and sustainable changes occurred in schools and districts that worked collaboratively with teachers, parents and other community members to examine their school program and make recommendations for its refinement (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Williamson & Johnston, 1991; 1998; 2000). Starting a dialogue with the community was seen as a very tangible manifestation of a willingness to work collaboratively.

Issues in This Study

Concern about school effectiveness most often reflects local issues. It was no different in this study. Early efforts to provoke discussion about the middle level program centered on national issues and produced a luke-warm response.

Generally, teachers and parents felt that the national concerns were not evident in their schools. What drove their concern were local patterns of school organization, local curricular options, and school-based interaction between parents school personnel.

Therefore, an initial component of the middle school review focused on gathering and analyzing local data about the status of the middle level program. The district commissioned a study that included review of local achievement and climate data, complemented by data gathered through a series of focus-group interviews with teachers, parents, students and administrators. In all, seventeen focus group meetings took place to gather information from constituents about their middle level schools.

These data were then analyzed to reveal local issues with the middle level schools. The concerns, while closely aligned with national issues, provided specific local examples and implications. Generally, the concerns reflected a tension around programmatic issues and included uncertainty about the purpose and function of the middle level schools, the appropriate emphasis on academic achievement, the use of time, opportunity for choice in curricular offerings, and instructional practice. These tensions are highlighted in Table 1.

Table 1

Programmatic Tensions

Junior High Model	vs.	Middle School Model
Academics	vs.	Developmental Responsiveness
Fixed Time	vs.	Flexible Use of Time
Choice	vs.	Required Course Sequence
Subject Centered	vs.	Interdisciplinary

The study revealed other issues as well. While intended to identify concerns about programmatic issues (e.g., teaming, exploratory programs, academic rigor), constituents grasped the opportunity provided by the focus groups to identify a parallel set of concerns. These concerns arose most frequently from teachers but were also manifested in discussions with parents.

Generally the concern centered on the process that would be used to study the middle level program and make recommendations for its improvement. There were major issues of trust---trust that the central administration would support recommendations from the study group, trust in the selection and appointment of committee members, trust in the decision-making procedure, and trust in the integrity of the process.

While trust emerged as a significant process concern, other issues were also evident. They included the belief, among many interviewees, that the outcome was pre-determined, and that the process was "cover" for achieving undisclosed goals of central office administrators. There was also concern about whether the discussion would be narrowly focused on a handful of specific issues, or more global in its review. Finally, and of major importance to parents, was concern that the study center on student interests, rather than the interests of school employees as reflected in workload concerns.

Table 2

Process Tensions

Real involvement	vs.	Superficial involvement
Trust	vs.	Mistrust
Defined/Fixed Response (pre-determined)	vs.	Flexible and Responsive
Narrow interests	vs.	Broad Reform
Student Interests	vs.	Employee Interests

The Struggle to Get Started

The district convened the middle level study group in March 2000. Prior to the initial meeting several months were consumed by selection of committee members. In these initial activities, few people recognized the depth of concern about trust.

In an effort to assure a fair and intentional process for selecting committee members, district staff met with representatives of the teacher's union to design an application form and determine a selection process. It was agreed that interested teachers and parents would complete an application containing several open-response questions about their interest in the committee, and the skills they would bring to the process. After receipt of the applications, a screening group, comprised of union and administration, met to identify the members.

Initial response to the invitation was tepid. Few applications were received. A second request was made and both union and administration encouraged people to apply.

Despite the structure and inclusiveness of the selection process, concern quickly emerged about committee membership. A few individuals were distressed that they were not selected. Assistant principals, as a group, were offended that they were not represented. Even though an effort was made to assure representation from each content area there was still disgruntlement. For example, physical education teachers felt that their interests went unrepresented because a teacher who primarily taught health was selected for the committee.

Initial Meetings

At the onset of the project the district used co-facilitators from the central office. Their role was to manage the logistics of committee meetings and to facilitate the committee's work. Additionally, an external consultant was

contracted to monitor the process and offer advice and support to the committee as it completed its work.

Initial meetings were frequently contentious although civil. Members struggled for clarify about the purpose of the committee. Was it to "solve" the exploratory workload problem, a contentious issue in recently completed contract negotiations, or to examine the entire middle level program?

This concern emerged repeatedly. Early discussions about committee operations, decision-making, and communication with constituents reflected the underlying issue of purpose. Significant disagreement emerged. However, committee members remained graceful, even in conflict (Garmston, 1998). Individuals suggested intransigent positions on issues, advocated collective bargaining as a tool for resolving the issues, and generally expressed disgruntlement with the pace and tone of the meetings.

The Democratic Response

Rather than ignore these issues of process, the co-facilitators steadfastly adhered to a collaborative direction. From these tough conversations emerged a strategy, ultimately endorsed by the entire committee, for its work.

The committee agreed to articulate a set of norms for how the committee would operate. It included such things as having an agenda, use of small group discussion as a tool, and maintaining minutes.

Of equal importance was agreement on norms of collaboration (Garmston & Wellman, 1999) that reflected a commitment to shared decision-making, to listening to all voices, to gathering and sharing information with constituents, and to working across constituent groups to study the issues and recommend solutions.

Table 3

Review Committee Norms

Norms of Operation

- start and end each meeting on time
- dates, times and location of meetings provided in advance
- agenda provided prior to each meeting
- breaks and/or lunch times stated on the agenda
- reflection time provided if situation/decision warrants
- sharing time will be provided at the beginning of each meeting
- small group discussion will be an integral part of the process
- information and minutes are provided to entire committee even if information pertains to only a sub committee / individual
- absent members are responsible for gathering information missed
- a communiqué will be provided for all stakeholders after each meeting

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Norms of Collaboration

- remain focused on students' best interests
- respect in verbal and non-verbal communication essential
- equal consideration will be given to all ideas and concerns
- remain conscious of the timeline
- issues and conflicts will remain in the room
- voice questions and/or disagreements
- support and rationale must be provided for opinions
- avoid personalizing issues
- consensus will be used for decision-making

Perhaps the most important early decision was one to use an external facilitator for the committee's work, someone who was not a member of any constituent group and one with no vested interest in the outcome of the committee's work. Neutral facilitation proved critical to accelerating the committee's work. Distrust about motives dissipated quickly.

Agreeing to an external facilitator was but the first step. The facilitator had to remain resolute in adhering to the agreed upon norms of collaboration and operation. The facilitator's role became one of asking questions, provoking conversation, assisting in the identification of resources, and suggesting strategies for analyzing and discussing the issues.

Quite quickly the committee moved from contentious behavior to place a greater focus on developing committee capacity for collaborative work. Once initial norms for both operation and collaboration were established, the committee considered how to proceed with its work.

One critical decision was articulation of a decision-making process. After brief discussion, the committee selected consensus as the preferred model. This proved to be an easily made decision, especially when the issues to be resolved were unclear. It became more difficult to maintain fidelity to the consensus model later in the committee's work, as it began to grapple with complex and difficult issues. Occasionally, the uncertainty of one committee member would postpone agreement. In every case, the committee, despite the desire for closure, adhered to its agreed upon model. Always, consensus was reached and in each case resulted in even greater commitment to this approach.

Table 4

Process Responses

Process Issues	Tools to Address
• mistrust • concern for superficial involvement • worry about a predetermined outcome • concern about focusing only on employee needs	• norms of collaboration • norms of operation • neutral facilitator • joint communiqué • agreed upon decision-making process • listen to and respect all voices • question from one, answer to all

Process issues were paramount in the initial committee work. However, it was also critical to be equally attentive to the way the committee would proceed with address programmatic issues.

Most of the committee's membership was comprised of representatives from individual content areas (e.g., counseling, mathematics, special education). Often the committee relied on the judgement of the member representing a specific area and deferred making a decision until the member revealed their position on the topic.

Quick intervention was needed to build capacity among committee members, especially among parents, to discuss, critique and debate issues in areas with which they might not be familiar. Several strategies were utilized.

First, it was agreed that the committee would focus on data, rationale and supporting documents as preferred sources of information, rather than individual preferences and intuition. This proved to be an important decision. Occasionally, a member would describe themselves as an "expert" in an area and offer a preferred solution. In some cases it was just their individual opinion. The committee adopted a stance of asking for documentation of the point-of-view frequently by gathering additional information, asking for the specifics of state and national laws and regulations or consulting with other school district personnel. Building shared understanding of the issues through shared readings, and committee research helped to dissipate the reliance on one individual to advocate for a strategy or solution.

Second, the committee endorsed the collection of local data. An outside consultant was selected to analyze readily available data (e.g., attendance, achievement, promotion and retention) and collect data from clients about satisfaction with the middle level program. It was decided that a series of focus group sessions would be held with students, parents, teachers and administrators to learn from them about the district's middle level schools.

Third, the committee agreed to identify, read and discuss a set of common readings that would establish a shared based of information for its work. These

foundational readings, about middle level education, about specific programmatic topics, and about the early adolescent learner, were used initially as the committee developed a vision statement for the district's middle level schools. The readings helped parents become comfortable with their role on the committee.

Fourth, the committee, based on the local data and the shared readings, identified three essential issues to drive the committee's work. These key issues, posed as a set of questions, drove subsequent committee deliberations. The issues incorporated nearly all of the concerns with the middle level program and are detailed in Table 5.

Table 5

Essential Issues

1.	Choice: Do students have choices in their curricular program? If so, what is the appropriate balance between required courses and elective courses?
2.	Block: What options exists for curricular blocks? What are the impiications for teaching and learning?
3.	Integration: Are there curricular areas that no longer offer separate and distinct courses? If so, what are they? How might they be integrated into other curricular areas?

Fifth, it was agreed that if one member asked a question of the facilitator or district staff, all members would receive the answer. This strategy minimized the perception that some members had greater access to information or to district decision-makers than other members.

Finally, the committee adopted a process that created study groups comprised of teachers, parents and administrators to study all key issues. The

study groups were charged with exploring their issue, identifying models and examples of strategies used in other schools, and articulating options for the larger committee. The subcommittees reported regularly to the larger committee and received feedback about their work. This interaction helped to narrow the investigation and focus the study.

Table 6

Programmatic Responses

Programmatic Issues	Tools to Address
• function and purpose of the middle level school • a fixed model or one based on local student needs • academic achievement or developmental responsiveness	• develop shared understanding through common readings • articulate key questions that must be answered • formation of study groups comprised of each constituent group to investigate issues • identify models and examples, rather than one solution • clarify advantages and disadvantages for all recommendations

Continuing Conversations

The committee's work continues. The district embarked on a multiyear review of its middle level program, one designed to study the current program and make recommendations for its enhancement.

Agreement was reached on several early program descriptors. For example, after lengthy examination, the committee agreed on a recommendation for the structure of the day and the allocation of time. It also resolved the tension

between a required exploratory program for all students, and a program that offered greater choice for students and parents.

These initial decisions, while important, merely represented the larger and deeper conversations that were taking place about the function and purpose of the middle level school. The tension about purpose and function often manifests itself most visibly in the organization and structure of the school and therefore early discussions centered on organizational and structural concerns.

The conversation about the middle level program continues. It is a healthy conversation built on a foundation of increased trust, commitment to collaborative work, and a focus on strengthening the program for students.

While lengthy, and frequently contentious, the early discussions about process were necessary to build a commitment from committee members to their joint efforts---to respectful discussion, to shared understanding, to collaborative investigation. The early emphasis on norms of collaboration and decision-making smoothed the way for addressing the tough, and frequently contentious issues of curriculum and instruction that would come later.

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